

ary opportunity and equity. If that is to happen, we must uncover students' preconceptions and expectations and integrate those results as we rethink course objectives and the means of accomplishing them.

The book follows the model of an inside-out exploration. The first of the three parts begins with an examination of students' goals, expectations, and orientation toward college. The second part focuses on the interactions between professors and students inside individual classrooms, and the third examines the issue of academic literacy across classrooms. As a whole, my aim is to illuminate how college students understand their educational paths, what mismatches exist between their expectations and their professors' expectations, and how some of the traditional structures and norms of higher education function as obstacles to increased access and educational opportunity.²⁶ Ultimately, American higher education is due for reinvention, if it is to address the realities that apply to today's students and to better address the American ideal of educational opportunity.

PART 1

STUDENTS

ONE OF THE TRUISMS about the two-year sector is that its diversity when it comes to educational missions, program offerings, and student population creates a bewildering and contradictory set of policies and practices within each college.¹ In addition, community colleges are heavily influenced by the local and state contexts, and as a result the variation extends across colleges as well. This factor complicates efforts to offer an accurate description of community colleges and the students who attend them.

Even colleges serving the same metropolitan area may have wildly different reputations. I have visited campuses that students characterize as a continuation of high school, either because the campus draws "all the dual-enrollment kids"—high school students taking college courses for credit—or because, as the intermediate step between high school and four-year colleges, it more closely resembles the high school stage than a university. In the words of a student describing his college, "This is an in-between thing; use this as a warm-up if you're not sure you want to go to a four-year." Or as another student put it, "This is like high school with cigarettes." Other colleges boast distinguished academic reputations, and I have heard students refer to a particular college on the West Coast as the sister school to the state's top university, and to a college in the Northeast as "Har-

ward on the Hill." The most vivid description I have heard requires familiarity with *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), a film portraying the poverty and violence facing black men in the inner-city ghetto of South-Central Los Angeles. Justifying her decision not to attend the college closest to her home, Nora characterized it like this: "Have you seen that movie *Boyz n the Hood*? Think of the 'hood—with some classes." Most often, though, the fundamental character of the community college derives from the idea that its doors are open to everyone. At more than one college, students and faculty members joked that the full name of a college with initials like ACC or ECC should really be *Anyone Can Come or Everyone Can Come*.

Inside different colleges—indeed, inside individual classrooms—students may be pursuing one of many possible goals, including transfer to a baccalaureate-granting college, certification or licensure in an occupation, exploration of possible career paths, avocational interests, or job-specific professional development. On average, though, well over two-thirds of first-time community college students enter with the express goal of attaining an educational credential. With two exceptions, the students who participated in my research were following specific degree paths.

Recent high school graduates, who represent the majority of first-time community college students, tended to report that they had always assumed that college would be the immediate step after they finished high school. Such students arrived at the community college with the intention of completing two years of coursework before transferring to a four-year college. Some arrived at the community college feeling academically prepared for college-level work. Others found themselves there because of their weak academic backgrounds. Mariella, for example, noted, "I didn't have the best grades in high school, so I didn't apply to any four-year colleges. I just thought it was a waste of time, since I knew that I wasn't going anywhere real good. So that's why I'm here." If inadequate academic preparation accounted for some

students' arrival at a community college, for others finances had dictated the path to take. One student characterized recent high school graduates as follows: "A lot of people who come to the community college—not half, but a lot of them—are here because they don't have the grades to get into a good college, and the other people are here because they don't have the money to get into a good college. That's my experience. Between those two things, some people coming in aren't really that dedicated and other people are; it's the same at any college" (Shelley). Mark, for instance, a second-semester student majoring in computer science, explained, "I'll be going here for a year and then transferring to [the nearby university]. I thought it would be nice to save a little money before I head off." Shelley, who hoped to transfer to a four-year college in environmental science, viewed her community college stint as the only way of being able to afford college tuition. Regarding her choice to attend a community college, she said, "Really it was just financial. I got into several out-of-state universities coming out of high school, but I couldn't afford any of them. Even with academic scholarships they were still too much money, because I have to pay for half of my own college. My parents will only pay half of what in-state would cost, and the cost of [the universities] was ridiculous, so I came here." Some of the students who delayed going to college for a few years after high school graduation asserted that college attendance was never in doubt for them, but that they needed to take a break between high school and college. In some cases, work or family obligations required their full attention. In other cases, students attributed the delay to being "tired" of school. Hugh, for example, knew when he graduated from high school that he would eventually attend college. "I wanted an education, but I wasn't ready to put forth the horsepower; I wasn't ready to get serious about it. So three years later I found myself working in [Southwestern city], and started spending time around some people that were influencing me towards getting a degree. And

after about, I'd say, six months of thinking things through, I decided that I wanted to get started on a four-year degree of some sort." Other students who delayed their college enrollment after high school had not imagined that they would ever take advantage of higher education. Especially for male students in this category, the impetus for returning to school was most often economic. Paul noted, for instance, that after several years of full-time employment, "I saw what different paths my friends went on, and I decided that I didn't want to *not* go back to school at all." In particular, he said, "I saw friends working at the pizza place—and I didn't want to do that."

Jay, who also returned to school to advance his career, had for financial reasons not expected to have a shot at higher education. "My friends had the ability to go straight into university without worrying about paying. I didn't. I lived on my own in high school, and so as soon as I graduated I needed to produce money because I didn't have any."

For women who had left high school and started families years earlier, attending college had not been part of the plan. Changes in their lives, though, had spurred them to consider higher education. Often this decision coincided with their children's entering elementary school. Marie, who was pursuing a degree in social work, recalled, "At one time, [my husband] had a little problem with his health and we were at the hospital. I started to look around and said, 'I can do this,' and that's how it all began. My children are old enough so I can say, 'It's time for Mom to do something she would really like.' And that is how it all emerged: I wanted to get back to school for myself."

I could offer many more examples of the lives and pathways of individual students, but in the end I cannot tell the story of every student I have met. Instead, in the next three chapters I share some of what I have learned from the students I've encountered, analyze common patterns, and offer a few snapshots of individual perspectives. In the process, I draw on interviews with more

than 120 students, conducted as part of four different research projects. The three chapters take up themes that consistently emerged from those interviews, and provide the basis for understanding the tensions and misunderstandings that occur inside college classrooms.

CHAPTER 2

THE STUDENT FEAR FACTOR

I WOULD NOT HAVE expected Eva to panic during her first composition class. Eva's reports of her high school preparation for college, her prior experiences in English classes, and her attitude toward writing in general all suggested that she would feel optimistic about Comp 1A. Furthermore, she spoke of her family's strong support for postsecondary education as well as her own commitment to a career that requires a college degree (that of schoolteacher). Eva asserted that although her parents had not put *a lot* of pressure on her (or on her younger sister), they did "make sure we know it's good to come to college." In fact, her parents continually reiterated the school-career connection: "You're working now, but you've got to go to school, because you've got to get a career." Eva's mother served as a role model in this regard: she had recently begun a postsecondary degree program to advance her own career goals. Despite the many reasons for Eva to feel at least relatively confident about her ability to succeed, she felt a sense of alarm when she was introduced to the objectives and structure of her first-semester English class: "That first day, when the professor said that it's going to be an essay after an essay, I was scared. I was like, 'Oh, my God, I'm not going to be able to make it.' . . . Just the fact that she said, 'Oh, you get an essay after an essay after an essay'—that's what scared me."

Eva's case is by no means unique. Regardless of age, ethnicity,

academic background, educational goals, or the path to college, students reveal tremendous anxiety about their educational trajectories and ability to succeed in college. This chapter focuses on the "total fear factor," as one student aptly described it—a dimension of the student experience that has emerged in every study I have conducted, across community colleges in different regions of the country and with a highly diverse range of students. The recurrence of this fear factor in such varied contexts attests to its profound effect in shaping students' college experiences. Chapter 2 explores the phenomenon, the nature and source of students' anxiety, and the strategies for managing those fears that students employ.

STUDENT ANXIETY

Regardless of the path that had led each student to college, enrolling in college courses proved to be an immensely stressful transition. For recent high school graduates as well as those outside the "traditional" age range, entering college marked a high-risk and anxiety-provoking transition in their adult lives.

Students fresh from high school, for instance, indicated that the transition into college represented a crucial threshold to adulthood. Melanie, a recent high school graduate and a first-semester college student at Lake Shore Community College in the Southwest, described her initiation to college as follows:

Here, I've had to really break out of the comfort zone of high school, and I've had to be very much more independent. In high school, if you didn't do homework, you were able to copy off a kid, one of your friends, or you were able to find out information from one of your friends if you skipped a day or whatever. But here, it's pretty much, if I skip, it's my fault. If I don't turn it in, it's my fault. And it's all dependent upon me, and it's made me a lot more independent. It's really pushed me into an area that I don't want to go, but I have to. I mean, it's not, college isn't so much an academic life, but it's also a very social and emotional part of who you are, too.

In high school, everyone tells you what to do, they tell you what

classes to take, they direct you in certain ways, they put you in categories, and they put you in smart classes or dumb classes. And here in college, nobody does that for you. You have to figure it out on your own. I think college makes you a lot more serious.

Early in her first semester, Melanie had indeed taken a serious approach to college. She had developed both specific long-term career plans and a detailed strategy for realizing them. She would complete two years of college coursework at Lake Shore Community College. At the same time, she would complete some core requirements through the state university's online program. The next step consisted of transferring to the university, where she would earn a B.A. in psychology, then a Ph.D. She knew that an internship would be required for her to become a psychologist, and she had estimated the time it would take for her to become a practicing psychologist. All these steps, she noted, were crucial if she was not to "waste any time," and she described the effort she put into developing a logical plan. "I've had to figure out degree plans, courses at LSCC that can transfer to _____ University, the online courses at State that can transfer to the university; and as much as the counselors have helped me—I mean, they are really good at what they do—but a lot of this is set on you. And I think that really helps you grow as a person, because in the real world, nobody helps you besides your family. Nobody's going to help you. So, yeah, I think I have gotten a little more serious."

In many ways, Melanie fit the profile of a successful college student. She had formulated a clear and seemingly realistic educational plan, she was attending school full-time, she could draw financial and emotional support from her family while pursuing her goals, and she evaded the disadvantages that first-generation college goers face. In addition, she spoke positively about her academic preparation for college; for example, Melanie noted how fortunate she had been to attend a high school where "they didn't pressure us to make great grades, but you were more so-

cially accepted within the school if you were a smart kid." And although Melanie had not necessarily earned the highest grades there—she mentioned "doing a lot better, gradewise" at the community college than she had during high school—she had enjoyed the opportunity to take "higher-level" classes, such as Advanced Placement English Literature. During her final semester in high school, she had taken one class at the community college, which made her feel more prepared for her first semester as a full-time student at the college.

Despite these advantages, Melanie spoke vividly of the fears she confronted on matriculating. Recalling the anxiety she had felt on the first day of the fall semester, she told me, "When I came on my first day here, as I was walking up through that parking lot—I had to park all the way over there at the other end, because it was, like, crazy packed here, on the first day. I remember walking up, thinking, 'I'm all by myself now.' Not literally, but the decisions that I make from today on, I'm going to have to make on my own. My family can advise me, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, the decision that I make is going to be my fault, or it's going to be my achievement. You know what I mean? And I think that was just a lot."

This realization, Melanie confided, was too much to handle: "My body just said, 'This is too much stress, this is too much'—so much that she rushed from the parking lot to the closest women's room, feeling sick to her stomach."

MELANIE

Melanie took four classes her first semester in college: composition, math, psychology, and French. Taking all four at once was challenging, but she felt that she was a serious student, committed to doing well. Throughout our conversation about her classes, Melanie contrasted her college coursework with her high school experience, and in doing so, consistently highlighted the increased academic pressure of college. For example, she described the fast pace of her French class,

as compared with the Spanish classes she took in high school: "I never realized how fast college would be—comparing one year of high school with one semester of college. It's really fast pacing. Like, I'm taking French right now, and that has really kicked me in the bum. Because in high school, you have two weeks to learn one section. And here it's like one day you learn a section, the next day you learn another section, it's just so fast paced, but I'm doing pretty good. . . . I think it's just because I've eliminated, like, my close, close friends, and all that kind of stupid high school drama that you go through, because in high school it's not really about academics."

Young adults such as Melanie were not the only ones to view the first semester of college as scary, unfamiliar, or life-changing. Individuals well outside the "traditional" college age range also spoke of the stress of assuming the responsibilities of college. Colleen, who had dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen, decided to return to school when her own children reached school age. At that point, she told herself, "Well, this is the right time for me, and the right time in my life, and I'm mature enough to handle it." Still, she admitted, "it was still really scary. Oh, my God, it was a life-altering change."

Because nearly every student viewed a college degree as essential to her future, they were all embarking on high-stakes ventures. Many lacked the kind of "college knowledge" typical of middle-class students and remained uncertain about how to approach the degree track and their coursework.¹ As a consequence, even as the vast majority of students were convinced that their future success hinged on their obtaining a college degree, they also revealed tremendous anxiety about the educational and occupational paths they were embarking on. A significant component of students' stress was directly linked to their doubts about succeeding in college and realizing their career goals.²

For some students, this fear—a natural part of any life tran-

sition—was heightened by their past experiences with failure in academic contexts. The frequent mentions of failure in student interviews included tales of having made bad decisions, performed poorly at various levels of elementary and secondary school, failed at specific assignments in high school courses, and failed or dropped classes at the postsecondary level. In addition, many students had fallen down on one or more of the entry-level assessments, whether in reading, writing, or math. In the case of math, the majority of the students I met had failed the test and had been required to enroll in at least one remedial math class before taking courses to fulfill the college math requirement. Thus, for many students, past failure provided objective evidence of their academic inadequacy.

Even students who did not explicitly discuss past failures revealed an underlying lack of confidence, and gnawing doubts about their capacity to succeed in college. For many, their very presence at a community college—the least selective and lowest tier of colleges—offered proof of their minimal academic competence. In other words, whereas admission to a selective college—or even one that is less selective—offers some indication that a student has the capacity to succeed at that school, even this tenuous assurance is not available to students who enter a college with an open-admissions policy.

THE FEAR FACTOR

By enrolling in college courses, committing to a degree plan, and envisioning long-term objectives that depended on success at the community college, each student had stepped into the role of college student. The many students who seriously doubted their ability to succeed, however, were anxiously waiting for their shortcomings to be exposed, at which point they would be stopped from pursuing their goals. Fragile and fearful, these students expressed their concern in several ways: in reference to college professors, particular courses or subject matter, and the

entire notion of college itself—whether at the two- or the four-year level. At the core of different expressions of fear, however, were the same feelings of dread and the apprehension that success in college would prove to be an unrealizable dream.³

Students admitted to feeling intimidated by professors' academic knowledge and by teachers' power to assess students and assign grades. Essentially, students were afraid that the professor would irrevocably confirm their academic inadequacy. When students described their stereotypical image of the university professor, a coherent picture emerged. Associating this ideal professor type with prestigious universities, students portrayed professors as "looking down on" students. One student, for example, spoke of his preconceived image of college professors as "all high and mighty," and Colleen spoke of the "pompous-ass professor" type. She associated this type with the elite universities, noting, "When you think of Yale, you're thinking pompous-ass professors."

From Colleen's perspective, her philosophy instructor tended "to act like he's teaching at Yale or something." During her interview with me, she addressed him in absentia, with this request: "Come down to our level a little bit. I know you have a lot of stuff to teach us, but don't be so high on that pedestal that we can't reach you." Her belief in the philosophy professor's clear superiority shaped Colleen's approach to the course. She explained,

It got to where I did not feel comfortable approaching him about anything, because I felt like he was this so-smart guy that I'm going to look really stupid in his eyes if I ask him any questions at all. And so I don't feel comfortable asking him anything. I just go to class, and I sit in the back of the classroom now, whereas I started at the front of the classroom. I sit in the back, behind whoever else I can find, so he doesn't even have to look at me. So I'm just kind of hiding in the back, thinking, "Yes, I'm going to pass this class, somehow."

Colleen's philosophy teacher was not at all typical. Except for Colleen, when students alluded to the "so-smart" or "high and

mighty professors," they noted that their community college professors did not fall into that category. Melanie, for instance, insisted that her community college instructors did not match her preconceptions about college professors. "When I was a high school student, I very much got the idea that college was very anonymous, that all you were, really, was a name on a page. You know, you really weren't a person." The difference between the stereotypical professor and students' actual professors did not mean, however, that students were unafraid of or unintimidated by their community college instructors.

Both Serena and Ryan provided examples of professors who were not "all high and mighty," but rather "kind of friendly." Yet their interactions with these professors still reflected an intimidating distance between professor and student. In describing his history professor, for instance, Ryan noted, "There's kind of something about him that, I don't know, makes me kind of hesitant to say something to him. He's kind of friendly, but it's just, I don't really know, something about him is just . . ." (his voice trailed off). Serena offered a similar description of her hesitancy about meeting professors during their office hours. "Like, some professors will be like, 'Oh, I'll be in my office,' but you're real hesitant to go to them, because of the way they are."

In fact, Colleen's avoidance strategy in her philosophy course represented a frequent student behavior. In this case, her approach was particularly interesting because she had demonstrated a high level of assertiveness in other situations—both on her own behalf and for other students. She had confronted the tutors at the writing center, for example, and had advised several younger students in her classes to consult with their instructors when problems arose. That Colleen would resort to hiding from her philosophy teacher suggests that other younger or less assertive students would be even more likely to react that way to stressful classroom encounters.

A wide range of courses, subject matter, and assignments caused students to worry. Math and composition, however, evoked by far the greatest anxiety for the vast majority of stu-

dents. Students' fear of the composition course was particularly intense.⁴ As the portal to more exclusive classes, composition plays a crucial role in selection of students. Those who successfully complete the course are judged proficient in the general writing skills deemed necessary for further academic study. Thus, the outcome for each student in composition holds important consequences for his or her educational trajectory and ability to succeed as a college student. Not by coincidence, among community college offerings this high-stakes course has some of the highest dropout rates—second only to those in math courses.

Kyra, who put off taking the course until her very last semester, noted, "I just had a fear of English, like this total fear factor." Likewise, Linda, who enrolled in and then dropped the course multiple times before finally completing it, explained, "The only reason why I waited is because I hate writing. I was always afraid of it—I think I've always had that problem."

Students' explanations for their anxiety often highlighted inadequate instruction in the past. "Oh, high school teachers [sigh]. I wrote two papers, I think, and that was it. And we never had to edit or anything. Yeah, I knew I was going to have a very hard time" (Suzanne).

Significantly, however, students who feared composition class did not necessarily perceive their high school preparation as inadequate. Anxiety and low self-confidence also plagued students who spoke favorably of their former English teachers or commented on the rigor of their high school English curriculum.⁵

This was certainly true for Eva, the student we met at the beginning of this chapter whose first day of class caused her to think, "I'm not going to make it." Jenn—another student who had earned As in her high school English classes—offered a more vivid description of her first day of college, at which point she, too, questioned whether she could handle the work required in composition. "I just saw all the work, and my heart was beating, and I'm just thinking, 'This is not real. There's no way college can be this hard.' It was just like they were throwing information at you, and just expecting you to be okay with it."

Although male students were much less likely than female students to offer unsolicited accounts of feeling anxious or unprepared, they too admitted that particular courses had generated nervousness. Diego, for example, expressed a sense of amazement at his success in composition class, particularly in light of his dislike of writing. As he explained, "I like reading, but I don't like writing. So I was surprised at my accomplishments in this class."

Becky: So it kind of sounds like you were very nervous about how well you would do.

Diego: Yes, yes, yes. I did come in like that. This is my worst, my—actually, I'm passing this class—but this was the one I was most afraid of.

Similarly, Carlos was worried about submitting essays in composition class "because of the fear and because I didn't know exactly what [the teacher] wanted."

Looking back, Carlos explained how his fears had initially paralyzed him, making his coursework more difficult: "It was like I thought I wouldn't make it, like I wasn't going to be able to make it. And I made it hard and it wasn't that hard." When I asked how he made his coursework harder, he elaborated, "It was the negative touch. It wasn't that I couldn't make it or I didn't do this right or I did this wrong. It was just that I was afraid. . . . Maybe it was the fear of college, too. . . . I think that's one of the things that makes a lot of people fail."

When asked, near the end of the semester, about their experiences at the start of the semester, some students admitted nonchalantly that they had anticipated that their courses would be more difficult. Claudia for instance commented, "I just expected more work. Like I'd never have time for anything else." Such students did not explicitly mention any anxiety around their original expectations, but it is possible that they, too, had experienced some nervousness at the start of their community college experience.

Students who expressed confidence in their ability to succeed

at the community college level were not necessarily as certain about the four-year level. Several students noted that taking classes at the community college had made them change their minds about transferring to a four-year college. Taking courses had convinced Nereida, for example, that she wasn't really "college material." She planned to continue at the two-year college but had decided not to transfer. Similarly, Susan did not want to transfer to the nearby university, she explained, "because I don't think I can hang." In reference to his own plan to transfer to a four-year college in California, Sebastian mused: "I just wonder how I would do at a four-year college, like at a Cal State or a UC. I'm sure things are turned up a notch over there."

His experience at Hillcrest Community College (HCC) had led Sebastian to conclude that you can "use HCC to mold your education; then, if you're really serious, you can go on to a four-year college." Describing himself as not yet motivated "all the way," Sebastian contended that once he reached that point, he would "probably really cut back on work and just focus on school and try to give a good push for a year or two, get something accomplished." His fear revolved around the four-year experience in store for him once he did get really serious. "I'm just hoping that these classes that I'm taking aren't these totally, like—I don't know the word—more like a waste of time; like doing all this easy stuff, when really I'm not aware of all the higher classes that I should be trying to take and get into." Nikki also confessed to her past and present fears of college. While discussing her transfer goals, she concluded: "So, we shall see. It's scary—very scary. . . I'm so unsure of what to expect at the next level. It was scary to come here—I wasn't sure what to expect, but it was okay. It turned out okay, I guess."

SEBASTIAN

This was Sebastian's second semester at the college, and he was taking three classes while working part-time at a video store. The previ-

ous semester, he had worked full-time and started with four courses, but he found that he "started to fall behind." Since he had changed his work schedule, Sebastian wasn't particularly worried about his courses. "Like English, so far it's good, it's pretty easy, not really bad at all, compared to high school—I hated English." In part he attributed it to his own maturity as a student: "Now that I'm in college, I'm a little more mature and . . . I can get something out of it now."

Sebastian hadn't yet enrolled in any college-level classes, however; that semester, he was taking three basic skills classes, one for math, one for reading, and one for writing. In all the classes, but especially the English courses, he felt confident about his ability to do well. "I feel prepared; I feel comfortable doing all the work. It's all easy for me." Sebastian's anxiety was reserved for the future courses; he admitted, "But, um, I'm going to see how English 1A goes, because that's like freshman English."

FEAR MANAGEMENT

Fear of failing as college students drove some to employ preventive strategies. Choosing such actions (or inaction), however, could easily divert students from accomplishing their original goals. This risk was what puzzled me about students like Eva. When I interviewed her, she and her classmates in Composition 1A were nearly all assured of passing the course. Yet even she, a competent and conscientious student who "always knew [she] would attend college," had considered quitting on day one of the course. Nor was she the only one to respond in that way. Jenn's anxieties on her first day almost led her to drop out of college altogether. Jenn prefaced her account by saying, "I really wasn't ready to come, at all. I wasn't ready for it altogether, just wasn't ready for another year of school. I was in a new town, at a new school. And I just didn't know what to expect."

The first day of school was a Tuesday, a day when all her courses were scheduled to meet. Before going to the first class of the day, Jenn spoke to her mother.

I called her up, and I said, "I'm on my way to school." She says, "Okay, I'll talk to you later on," and I said "okay." I went to my first class, had like a four-and-a-half-hour break, and then went to my other three, went home, and I thought, "I quit."

Then I called my mom up, and I tell her, "I quit. Yeah, I quit here." She asks, "How do you plan on living?" and I say, "I don't know. I don't know how I plan on living. I don't care." She says, "Jenn, it can't be that bad," and I say, "You want to hear what the hell I have to do?" And I went syllabus by syllabus, day by day. And she was just like, "Well, just take it one day at a time. Don't get overwhelmed." And I'm just thinking, "Don't get overwhelmed? It's a little late for that!"

So I sat there and bawled with Mama for three hours. Then I talked to my sister, and my sister tells me, "I'll help you out." So eventually, after like four hours of talking with my mom, and an hour and a half talking with my sister, they convinced me that I could do this, that I've been through tougher stuff than this, and that it'd be no big deal.

Clearly, quitting is the ultimate fear management strategy, because it offers a means of eliminating the source of anxiety; however, students did not necessarily opt out of school altogether. Other strategies offered students ways of continuing their studies, while warding off the worst forms of personal failure.

JENN

Although Jenn had received all As in high school, she described herself as "absolutely not" prepared for college. When I asked her to explain, she told me that her older sister, who had taken Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school, had reported being totally unprepared for college. In fact, her sister was constantly challenging Jenn, telling her, "You need to take harder classes—these are just simple classes." Her sister also told Jenn, "You're making all As. There is a problem here." And she's like, "You don't study. You barely do your homework." She said, "You know, you wait until the last minute to do your homework." And she's like, "I just don't see how you're making all As, when you're really not doing anything." Jenn was so ner-

vous about college that for the entire summer after high school graduation she tried to avoid thinking about registering for classes at the community college she planned to attend. If her mother hadn't been "getting on her" about it, she might not have followed through. Describing how the pressure affected her, Jenn provided an example from the summer: "So my mom was just on me. 'We need to get your scheduling done, dah, dah, dah,' and it was like, 'I'm overwhelmed. Don't bother me, don't talk to me.' I didn't talk to her for like three weeks."

One such strategy consisted of scaling back. Several students had been admitted to nearby four-year colleges, but had chosen instead to start their college careers in a less stressful environment. Adriana told me, that she had made a good decision, stating, "I think it's a good way to start because I'm afraid if I would have gone straight to [Research University], I would have been stressed out, because it would have been such a bigger thing."

Similarly, Ashley told me, "I'm just kind of getting my feet wet in the whole college experience thing. I'm new to the city, so I'm new to the area and everything, and I got accepted to Western State, but I got—I don't want to say I got scared, but I just wanted to save my own money, not be a burden on my parents. So I'm doing that and going to school here, and it is [pause]—it's smaller classes, and you get to [pause]—it's better. I'm gradually getting up there. And then I'll go, I'm going to go to Western State probably next fall, or the fall after—I'm not sure." When I asked her if she could break it down and assign percentages to her different reasons, Ashley came up with an estimate of 20 percent for saving money. "I really don't want to be a burden, and I'm probably going to get like financial aid and stuff. But, yeah, it's not that big. . . . I don't know, maybe like 20 percent." As far as the time to "gradually get up there" and be ready for the four-year college, "probably over 50 percent. Yeah, that's probably the biggest reason, is just really wanting to be ready."

For Ashley, the underlying fear involved being exposed—in

front of the teacher and her peers—as too stupid for college classes. “I don’t want to be the stupid kid in class, where everyone else is raising their hand, and I’m the only one not. And I know it’s not going to be like that, but it’s one of my biggest fears.”

In both instances, highly capable students with excellent records of performance in high school took themselves out of high-risk situations by scaling down and starting at LSCC.

Students with more marginal academic backgrounds were similarly driven by their fears to scale back their educational goals. Nereida and Susan were taking themselves off the baccalaureate track. Others spoke of newly formulated career plans, born of a desire to do “less school.” Examples of students who spoke of such scaled-back plans included Suzanne, who was considering cosmetology, and Mariella, who spoke of earning a certificate instead of an associate’s degree. For still others, scaling back would result in their withdrawing from school altogether.

A second fear management strategy was to redefine success and failure. Some students, who described the advantages that sprang from specific experiences of failure, exhibited remarkable resilience in the face of disappointments and derailed plans. This ability to reframe disappointments and failures as fortuitous twists of fate was expressed most eloquently by a Latino student named Carlos. Midway through his first semester of college, Carlos’s composition instructor, Michelle, recommended that he withdraw from the course, to avoid receiving an F.⁶ When I asked Carlos how disappointed he was that he would have to repeat the course, he responded with the phrase “No hay mal que por bien no venga” (There is no bad thing that can’t turn out for the good) and explained, “It’s okay, because now I’m going to focus more on the other classes. And right now, music is really hard stuff right now, so I’m going to focus on music and my other classes. It won’t affect me on my financial aid because I had fifteen hours, so now I have twelve.”

Other students seemed to be formulating protective rationalizations for imminent failure. For instance, near the end of the semester, Yolanda disclosed that she had many outstanding composition assignments. She had attended every class session, and noted that she had learned a lot of grammar (especially pronouns) by taking the class. In the same conversation, she offered a range of definitions of success in Comp 1A:

Success for one person can be, “I’ve actually conquered it by making the A I wanted to make.” “I went to all the classes,” can be a success. “I flunked the classes, but yet I understand what a pronoun is,” can be a success. . . .

And so you win some, you lose some. I may lose three hundred dollars and flunk in this class, but when I take the class again, I guarantee you that I’ll come back with a little bit more fire under me and say, “Okay, I know what you want done. So I know what I need, and I’m going to get it done.”

With this revised definition of success, Yolanda could finish the semester without completing the assignments and therefore fail the course, yet still retain a sense of efficacy that would enable her to return to LSCC the following semester to retake Comp 1A. In fact, Yolanda did not pass Comp 1A that semester. During the interview, she had expressed confidence that she was able to do the required coursework, and yet, two-thirds of the way through the semester, she had not yet submitted any of the essay assignments to her instructor. Yolanda was not unique in this regard. Across six sections of composition at LSCC, I observed students who attended class through the end of the semester, completed the assigned readings, and participated in the in-class activities—yet failed to submit written work for their instructors to grade. Still other students had disappeared altogether, silently withdrawing from the course and joining the 40 percent who did not complete Comp 1A.

A third fear management strategy consisted simply of avoiding any formal assessment. Every assessment-related activity

posed the risk of exposing to others (both professors and peers) what students already suspected: their overall unfitness for college. Thus, not participating in classroom discussions, avoiding conversations with the professor—whether inside or outside the classroom—or choosing not to attend class sessions offered fear-driven students another reprieve from exposure. Students have admitted that silence during class—whether in whole-group or small-group configurations—results from anxiety, not from laziness or lack of caring. Some students deal with test-taking anxiety by avoiding particular tests; others end up taking the test, only to stop attending class before they find out the results. The greatest risk, of course, lies in graded assessments of student performance. In the absence of evidence from assessments, students can still cling—however tenuously—to their identity as college students.

Jenn, who had reported feeling overwhelmed on day one by the coursework outlined on various syllabi, decided not to quit immediately, but she came to that decision only after hours of discussion with her family. When I asked Jenn how often, after that first day at LSCC, she reconsidered dropping out, she replied, “I would think that, probably, with every first test that there was.” In other words, the prospect of submitting the first graded assignment for each course was the most terrifying part of the semester. Barbara told about her first English class, during which the instructor administered an in-class writing assignment. With a sense of hopelessness, Barbara attempted to draft some sort of response; and at the end of the class, Barbara recalled, “I walked up to [the professor’s] desk. I handed her my paper and I said, ‘I don’t know what you want written down. I have no idea what an essay is.’ . . . She looked at me and I told her, ‘I’m not coming back.’” This particular example highlights the irony of such avoidance strategies, that students’ efforts to manage their fear of failure can easily lead to failure.

Elisa’s experience with the research paper assignment illustrates the extent to which her fear of failure drove her to the

brink of actual failure. On the day the research paper was due in Julie’s class, I had a conversation with Elisa and Charmaine, neither of whom was ready to submit a draft of the assignment. Whereas Charmaine expressed confidence that she would submit one soon, Elisa spoke of her loathing for the research paper assignment. In fact, she told us, she had withdrawn from Comp 1A during the spring semester after getting stuck on this very assignment. At this point in the fall course, with Julie as her instructor, Elisa had chosen a topic (the influence of media images on women) and begun brainstorming about possible theses; however, she voiced concern about finding more sources and demonstrated hesitance regarding the appropriateness of the topic for the research paper assignment. When I asked whether she had talked to her instructor, Julie, about those concerns, she replied, “But I feel so bad—I’m so far behind and I don’t want her to know.” Instead, Elisa thought that she would probably withdraw from the course and try again next semester.

Upon urging from Charmaine and me, Elisa did meet with Julie to discuss the research paper. Julie later reported to me that Elisa had successfully completed the assignment. “Her research paper she finally submitted to me was A work. I mean, I chuckled. I wrote a comment back to her: ‘LOL—I’m laughing out loud because your paper is awesome, and you were worried sick about submitting this paper to me, and this is your best paper.’”

When it came to learning, Elisa’s strategy of avoidance was clearly counterproductive. Such an approach to the assignment made sense only in light of her conviction that she was not a competent college student. From this perspective, error—whether past or potential, real or imagined—plays a destructive role, by chipping away at each student’s self-conception as a competent college student. Not surprisingly, students exhibited very low tolerance for feeling confused or making mistakes, phenomena they could easily attribute to their own inadequacy rather than to the process of learning new skills or information.⁷

This was certainly true of Natalie, a second-semester student at a California college. During her interview, Natalie assessed herself as entirely "unready" for college, attributing it to a personal character flaw—a form of fear-induced lack of effort.

I'm scared of hard stuff. I'm intimidated by hard stuff, so that's probably holding me back. I need more courage. . . . I'm a scaredy-cat; I say, "That class is too hard," instead of trying it out and applying myself. That's what's wrong with me.

I turned in my first paper and I got an X. I mean, you're supposed to get like, a B over X, or a C over X, so that you can have a chance to fix what you made a mistake in and then get that C. And I didn't get anything over that X—I just got an X. . . . See, that's why I don't turn anything in. . . . That's why I don't like turning anything in, because every time I do, I get a bad grade.

Natalie had carefully examined the syllabus for some clue about the mysterious X she'd received but still did not understand what it meant. Her friend, also in the class, chimed in, "That just means you got to rewrite the whole thing." Natalie disagreed, however. According to the written policies, "He said no rewriting. He said, Don't rewrite the papers, just correct them."

It is difficult to understand why Natalie did not complete any assignments after her initial X grades. Not only did she demonstrate familiarity with the syllabus and various course documents, in noting the correct instructions for students who receive an "over X" grade, but her understanding of the regulations also reflected careful reading of these relatively complicated texts. Yet her confusion about the X stymied her, instead of propelling her to investigate further. She continued to attend class, she participated in the small-group exercises, and she prepared for in-class quizzes. She did nothing about the incomplete essay, however. Nor did she submit any other essays. Instead, she avoided the problem. While her instructor waited fruitlessly for Natalie to seek his help, he assumed that she did not care about the course.

In the end, both teacher and student interpreted her performance as the result of individual deficits.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Using the example of his first math test of the semester, Carlos discussed his realization that the best plan was to work through the fear. On the day of the math test, he related, "I got panicked. And then I thought, 'Well, I'm going to try it,' and then I started writing and it was okay. That was it. I just got two problems wrong. And actually I got the first- or the second-highest grade in the class."

Carlos thus pinpointed the conundrum facing fearful students: fear drives them to the point of quitting, yet making the effort in the face of that fear may provide the evidence that they can succeed.

Of huge significance regarding this phenomenon is the fact that I generally interviewed students at the end of the semester. By that point, many others had already quietly disappeared from the class. A few of the students who attended the last few weeks of class might have ended up failing the course, but for the most part, I interviewed the most successful students. At the same time, I do not believe that I would have gained the same insights about student fear had I interviewed students who did not persist. Nor do I believe that the students I interviewed at the end of the semester would have admitted their prior fears had they not believed that they were going to complete their courses successfully. In other words, students who acknowledged their fears did so in the past tense; they had felt that way at the start of the semester but had progressed over the course of it toward feeling less afraid and more confident. I suspect that had they still harbored those shameful feelings of inadequacy, the instinct to avoid being evaluated would have prevented them from admitting their fears, perhaps even to themselves.

The depth of fear among the most successful and resilient stu-

dents—students who had persisted in their courses until the end of the semester—suggests that at least some students who had withdrawn from the course or failed to complete the graded coursework were pushed over the brink by their fears, into failure. For individuals who started the semester feeling unequal to “college student” demands, it was easy to perceive every dimension of college and college coursework as overly confusing and too difficult. Such students avoided the forms of active engagement that would have improved their chances of succeeding, while simultaneously diverting instructors’ attention from the core reason for their counterproductive behavior. In other words, such defenses against fear seriously undermined their chances of passing the course. In light of the large number of students who fail or withdraw from Comp 1A at community colleges, it is very likely that many employed the counterproductive strategies described by the students I have spoken with. Students like Jenn and Eva felt like quitting at the start of the semester, but other students actually did so at various points throughout the semester.

With a few exceptions, the composition students I interviewed had mustered enough courage to submit written work throughout the semester and ultimately completed the course successfully. Judged by the end-of-semester outcomes, the depth of fear that the interview respondents had experienced at the start of the semester was unwarranted. Once students overcame the biggest obstacle—once they submitted the most fear-inducing assignment—their performance far exceeded their initial pessimistic predictions. They had been able to overcome their fears without resorting to passive strategies of disengagement or dropping out.

For those who did pass the course, one of the most important lessons was that when they submitted the writing assignments, their deepest fears were disproved. For Kyra, who spoke to me of her “total fear factor” in Comp 1A, doing well in the class provided evidence of her writing competence. As she put it, “So

that kind of in itself indicates that I’m not as bad as I thought I was. And my fear is maybe just in my head, rather than actual fact.” Similarly, Linda concluded at the end of the semester, “I hated writing, but now I feel that I know that I can. I feel better now. I’m not afraid like I was before.”

Similarly, Jenn, who had left the first class session ready to quit school, described how her attitude changed after she had submitted the first graded assignment. “But once I got my first paper accepted for English, I was so excited. It made me want to go and write some more. Yeah, it made me want to go and write some more, and after my second paper, my mom just told me, ‘I don’t think anybody’s given you the chance to write. I don’t think anybody’s given you what you needed, to learn.’”

Individuals who are familiar with what is required and who are relatively confident from the start of their success as college students are most likely to achieve success. Conversely, those who are least conversant with the norms of higher education are at a distinct disadvantage; they are more likely to feel like outsiders and to doubt their ability to fit in. Indeed, for fearful students, every interaction in the classroom and with their professors outside class holds the potential to confirm their feelings of inadequacy. Yet the same strategies that relieve their fear can prove counterproductive for completing college coursework. In particular, avoiding assessment precludes the chance of proving their academic merit. Thus the fear of failure—rather than actual failure or evidence of unsuitability—prevents full commitment and engagement. How such fears and counterproductive strategies might be countered is therefore an important consideration in promoting student success. How individual professors have addressed the issue—indeed, *that* professors need to address the issue—lies at the heart of Chapter 6.